

Déjà vu – Again!

I had really enjoyed the 2003 Qld Champs at Passchendaele, despite an 80 minute error in the wee hours and was very much looking forward to the return. In the week prior I had reviewed my record from the previous event and seen that we had managed a km rate in the afternoon of just under 6km/hr and overall just under 4km/hr notwithstanding the said major error. Of course a further ~15% of my already mature life had passed since then so I felt that there would be a need to tone it down a bit this time. I was also well aware that a bunch of forest had been added in the west and I expected this to be slow and challenging.

We drove out on the Friday afternoon and spent the night comfortably in the Passchendaele homestead with hosts Carolyn and Ken plus a bottle of red. We truly felt for those a few km down the road in their tents when the rain started tumbling!!!!!!

One of the problems with returning to an area is that you arrive with preconceptions and mine was that we needed to attack the eastern area first and eat up a pile of distance before the dark and slower forest. I also continue to fancy myself as an outright chance, despite my maturing years and knew from past experience that Tamsin would stick with me no matter what I did, but also know that Darren and Robbie would be strong and straight and thus tough to toss. Getting the right plan would be important as I have proved many times over that a good plan poorly executed will generally beat a bad one well done!

Fortunately course showed that the afternoon in the east was a good idea but also suggested that the night in the forest was not going to be particularly simple. After much fiddling we settled on an anti-clockwise course that took out the east and north in the afternoon, most of the forest in the west overnight and then the southern forest and piece close to the Hash in the morning. We planned km/hr rates of; 5, 3¼, 2¾ and 3½ for each of the 6-hr periods, with options to grab the various “rats and mice” we had left off the plan towards the end if we were getting ahead of ourselves.

At the “off” we trotted down the main road to the SE with almost no-one else and as we headed towards 25 we were already totally on our own. Long time since that has happened. On through 90 to 37 and really enjoying ourselves jogging the downhills and flats and walking the uphills. Headed towards 52 and got confused with unmapped clearings and then with some odd mapping near the circle and lost a few minutes. Back on track through; 41, 58, 81 and 71. Lovely jog down the hill towards 100 and suddenly a searing pain in the foot, I’ve kicked a prickly pear in the grass! One spine is protruding from my shoe and I extract it from its 10+ mm embedment in my foot, but a lingering annoyance further down the foot doesn’t really go away!

Drift a bit right towards 33 but quickly back onto it and into the water at 10 over half an hour ahead of plan and feeling good. On through 42, 80 (which we hit straight on very pleasingly), 51, 70, 50 and 85. No idea what we are looking for at 65, but Tamsin spots the marker whilst I am looking for either a cave or an “s” so no harm done. Then lose the brain going towards 75 and have a couple of wanderings before collecting ourselves and onto 23 and the water at 11. It’s close to dark and we know we have 11 hours to the next water so it’s a big fill, lights on and warm clothing for Tamsin before heading up to 55. 34 is the first in the dark and involves a small hesitation but no real drama. We have hit our 7-hr marker 53 minutes ahead of plan and life is great. We see 101 as a seriously challenging CP in the early dark but conservative route choice and concentration brings great rewards.

On to 45 which also looks daunting and suddenly we are in thick and (very) wet bush. But care and concentration pay dividends and we nail it. Conservative choices also dominate the route to 43, we hit the cliffs just to the SW and head towards the “saddle” only finish up in a vague area of flat scunge. Back to the cliffs and careful bearing rewards us with a marker randomly placed in said vague scungy area! A few minutes lost.

We think we have this sorted and head with confidence on a bearing towards 44. A little after crossing the main watercourse to the north I begin to struggle to match the terrain to the map and then Tamsin twists an ankle and we stop for a while to retape it. We head into the circle but can fine neither watercourse nor spur. After a lot of wandering we retire to the dam to the NNW and take a very careful bearing and pace count. Still no watercourse or spur so back to the dam and carefully pace count along the watercourse to each of the junctions. Still no spur. Ninety minutes gone and no idea where we are so head off in the general direction of 54 and find a watercourse that looks okay but has no marker. Later determined to be the one immediately to the west of the one with the CP but at the time could have been on the moon. We trudge forlornly to the track to the south, hit an unmarked one which we follow briefly but then find the mapped one which we follow around to a point that allows us to attack 93, successfully. Three hours with zero points and suddenly we are 70 minutes behind plan!

64 also proves elusive as we hit the watercourse between the two key junctions but Tamsin works it out and we are on our way but by now the spring has gone from our step due to my incompetent navigation and our feet are starting to break up from the wet. A bit of misery is setting in! 57 and 47 in the clear make a pleasant change and we head back into the forest with 61 picked up okay despite me struggling to really understand

the map in this area. We decide to drop 36 and head straight for 84 which causes no nav problems but the climb up the escarpment takes a real toll on the tiring bodies and failing feet. The low confidence has us go round the track to 63 which makes it slow but simple and then we wander off in the general direction of 83. Seriously vague area but we inch our way into it with only a small amount of lost time.

Out to the track and round to 92 which proves more challenging than expected because the watercourse doesn't manifest itself particularly at the track, but we do okay. We decide to take the ridge top route to 74 and it is dreadful. Thick dead sticks and undergrowth plus rocky ground is very slow and hard on the broken feet. A small problem with the wrong spur part way along but generally just painfully slow. Onto the spur and down past the horseshoe cliff line and suddenly we are into a vague, flat scungy area! The spur has disappeared! We stay on bearing and a marker looms out of the scunge. A bit lucky methinks.

Head around the hill to the saddle towards 53. Hit the saddle in the scunge but instead of heading down a steep hill per the map we enter a flat area of thick vegetation. Okay, east to the track and in from there which may have been a bit slow but at least provided confidence to the shattered mind. By this time of course you have to line us up with a tree to see if we are moving and we know that despite the impending dawn it's likely to get worse as the bodies continue to deteriorate and the feet complain ever more loudly. Totally confused on the tracks coming out of 53 towards 73 but ultimately worked it out and nailed the CP.

Dawn was breaking and, unfortunately, with it my concentration. Plus we were over 2 hours behind plan. No idea what happened with 35 but I thought we looked in every watercourse that may possibly have been the correct one but without any success so dejectedly we trudged to the track and up to the water at 12. Who should be there but Darren, Robbie and their mate. We lamented our woeful night whilst they regaled tales of great conquest. Then they sped off up Piper's Dodge like spring chickens. As we passed them coming down Robbie showed what they had done to date. They were clearly 100's of points ahead of us and travelling at twice our speed. Ah well, there is always the Vets! Even the mate's "this is the f@#%ing stupidest sport I have ever done" could not console us.

We now entered the area where I had my 80 minute moment in 2003. Tamsin needed to stop for another retaping as the previous lot had worn holes in her foot and I proceed to lose my mind totally and take us via the hilliest possible route to 82. We cut off the southern loop and headed straight for 95 and shortly after had a bit of a sit down as it turned out Tamsin had forgotten to eat for 4-5 hours which was helping to explain why she was a little below her normal robust self. A change of clothes and bucket load of calories and she bounced away towards 72. The tiredness showed coming down as we wandered off and lost time going towards 60 but then picked up the pace slightly heading to 56. A final loop around; 46, 21 and 40 brought us back to the Hash with 13 minutes to spare and our feet feeling like the soles were on fire..

Miraculously we had picked up some points on the "boys" in the morning. Their route had "boxed" them in a bit and so we finished up on equal points but they had finished 22 minutes ahead of us and thus were deserved winners. Our appalling navigation did not deserve anything better!

Ironically I had also been beaten into 2nd on time in the Qld Champs in 2008 again as part of a Mixed Vets team and again by a team containing Darren Smith. Add this to suffering the same fate (albeit not by Darren) in the 2009 Upside Down and the 2005 12-Hr and maybe I might start to get a complex about it!

Still, it was a great day out in a fantastic area with a well set course and it's always fun to get out in the bush with a map in hand.

Oh, and remember that prickly pear, well upon removing shoes and socks I found another spine that had embedded itself firmly in the joint at the base of the 4th toe on my right foot. As I write this over a week on it is still causing me grief! Hard to imagine having any more fun really!

Richard Robinson

Note: Sad story of declining fortunes presented graphically below

